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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 001999

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MCA](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#) [MASS](#)
SUBJECT: VIOLENCE IN MINDANAO CONTINUES BUT NOT "ALL OUT
WAR"

REF: A. MANILA 1962 (NEW CLASHES IN MINDANAO)
[1](#)B. MANILA 1922 (PHILIPPINE FORCES SEEK TO ENFORCE
RULE OF LAW)

Classified By: Amb. Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: As fighting between Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) forces and the Philippine military enters its second week, the Philippine Armed Forces continue to score successes against the MILF, and the MILF insurgents appear to have miscalculated their own military capabilities and the fallout from their attack. Muslim and Christian political leaders have questioned publicly the legitimacy of the MILF's actions in central Mindanao and voiced support for the military. While some local Mindanao politicians criticized the military for allowing the attacks to happen, national lawmakers and the Philippine Commission on Human Rights slammed the MILF attacks as "terrorism" and argued that the MILF leadership needed to show it could control its forces and demonstrate its commitment to peace. President Arroyo and Philippine Armed Forces Chief General Alexander Yano have pledged to restore order and said the attacks could lead to a broader government campaign to neutralize MILF forces in several Mindanao provinces. Despite these warnings, the Philippine military has continued to adhere to an operations plan bent on isolating the three MILF commands conducting hostilities and avoiding an "all-out war." Key politicians are legitimately upset by the MILF attacks and have lined up behind the armed forces, but critics have also used the situation in Mindanao to as a pretext for criticizing the Arroyo government for having taken too lax a security position in the peace negotiations, and the with the MILF more broadly. The impact of the widely negative reaction to the MILF's actions is still unclear, although it may weaken the MILF's position in future peace negotiations. END SUMMARY.

AFP HITS HARD, MILF SUFFERS POLITICAL BACKLASH

[1](#)2. (C) With the outbreak of violence in central Mindanao between Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) entering a second week, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) has demonstrated clear military superiority over the MILF in several engagements, pounding MILF positions with over 1000 rounds of 105 mm howitzer rounds and scoring direct hits in multiple air strikes. The AFP has reported over 300 MILF fighters killed to U.S. military observers, much of that coming as a result of the MILF forces massing in locations, rather than utilizing hit-and-run tactics. AFP Chief of Staff Alexander

Yano emphasized to the Ambassador that he was very pleased with the military's ability to contain the violence, avoiding all out war. The military's response has been effective, in part, because of its ability to mobilize quickly and reinforce troops in the field with units from central and northern Philippine commands, even though the AFP only has two operational C-130 aircraft and limited logistical support.

13. (C) While some local Mindanao politicians have criticized the AFP for allowing the MILF to initiate the attacks, the AFP emphasized that they could not preempt MILF attacks because of the government's commitment to uphold the ceasefire agreement. As MILF attacks have continued, there has been political backlash among Muslim and Christian political leaders against the MILF, who are accusing the MILF of "highly condemnable acts" and the MILF leadership of "having lost control over their forces." The MILF attacks that have killed dozens of soldiers and civilians in central Mindanao began after the peace process stalled on August 4, but instead of intimidating the government with a MILF show of force, the negative reaction by a number of political figures indicates a miscalculation on the part of the MILF. Both the Philippine Commission on Human Rights and a group of top lawmakers from several parties slammed the MILF for the attacks, saying the rebel group had committed "acts of terrorism" and called on the government to restore law and order in Mindanao. Senate President Manuel Villar said the Senate is considering providing a supplemental budget to augment military operations against the MILF and Chairman of the House Defense Committee Arthur Celeste assured the Philippine armed forces of full support in their operations

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against MILF attackers.

ARROYO ISSUES ULTIMATUM, CLIMATE TENSE

14. (C) Reacting to mounting civilian casualties, thousands of people displaced, property destruction, and lethal attacks on military personnel, President Arroyo ordered the military and police August 18 to "defend every inch of Philippine territory against MILF forces and immediately restore peace in the affected areas" of Mindanao. President Arroyo challenged the MILF leadership to make a choice for peace by surrendering Ombra Kato and Abdulla Macapaar (a.k.a. Commander Bravo), two rogue MILF commanders deemed responsible for the attacks in central Mindanao. However, MILF chief peace negotiator Mohagher Iqbal told the media that the MILF had "restrained" Kato and Macapaar and would not surrender them to the government forces. President Arroyo also approved a reward offer of 5 million pesos (approximately USD 110,000) each for Kato and Macapaar. The decision to offer the rewards followed the government's announcement that it had prepared over 150 criminal cases for arson, robbery, and murder against the two commanders. The announcement and increasing AFP pressure prompted a key MILF sub-commander and 30 followers to surrender to government forces, but the situation in Mindanao remains tense, with both sides wary of further escalation.

COOLER HEADS PREVAILING FOR NOW

15. (C) Despite the high-pitched rhetoric coming from key legislators and warnings from Arroyo and Yano that continued attacks by the MILF could lead to a broader military campaign, all out war has not broken out in Mindanao. During a nationally televised appearance, Arroyo said the government would defend the Filipino people against any attempt "to disturb our aspirations for a genuine lasting peace not only in Mindanao, but the whole country." MILF Chairman Al Haj Murad Ebrahim said in a television interview August 20 that although the MILF leadership was in a difficult situation,

"there is still a chance in going back to peace as long as both parties implement utmost restraint." Other Administration officials have been echoing Arroyo's commitment to the government's effort to achieve a durable peace accord with the MILF in public statements, but their comments reflect tension in the Administration.

16. (C) Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro and Secretary of the Interior Ronaldo Puno have both taken a hardline stance towards the MILF, authoring the reward plan for Kato and Macapaar and demanding that MILF fighters be punished for their crimes against civilians. However, Teodoro has declined to join the chorus of officials accusing the MILF of insincerity in their desire for peace, stressing the government is not closing the door on discussions with the MILF. "If we remove dialogue, you are forcing the MILF to fight," Teodoro said. Similarly, Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez said that while the MILF offensive was "virtually a declaration of war," and that he doubted the MILF could be trusted, the Arroyo Administration was bent on salvaging the peace talks. Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process Hermogenes Esperon admitted that dealing with the MILF has been difficult, but that the government still needs to negotiate and that "the peace process will always be given primacy -- the alternative is unthinkable."

AMBASSADOR REITERATES U.S. COMMITMENT

17. (SBU) In statements to the press August 19, the Ambassador emphasized that the U.S. remains committed to providing development aid to Mindanao. The Ambassador said she remained hopeful that the Philippine government and MILF negotiators would be able to resume negotiations after order is restored in Mindanao and that the important thing is "for all the Philippines to find the right framework for lasting peace in Mindanao." In public appearances over the last week, the Ambassador repeatedly has condemned the violence in Mindanao as being counterproductive to the peace process.

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COMMENT

18. (C) It remains unclear whether the MILF leadership had knowledge of, or authorized, the initial illegal occupation of villages in central Mindanao two weeks ago. Civilian militias may have ramped up the violence by engaging the MILF units as they withdrew. Whatever the genesis of the current fighting in Mindanao, the MILF appears to have miscalculated its ability to use hostile actions to intimidate the government into accepting MILF terms in the peace negotiations. Civilian casualties and ambushes on military convoys have received extensive negative media coverage, damaged the MILF's public image, and have led influential legislators to propose increases in military funding. Combat losses suffered at the hands of a motivated and disciplined AFP indicate the MILF may have overestimated their military capability and point to clear progress the AFP has made in their ability to conduct sustained, measured operations in combat. In addition to degrading the MILF military forces, the AFP's successes may have impacted psychologically the MILF's belief in its own military prowess. Although it is unlikely that all-out war will break out, the next few weeks will most likely see the AFP continuing to inflict losses on three renegade MILF base commands as Philippine forces restore order. These losses in military strength coupled with public support coalescing behind government forces could ultimately weaken the MILF's negotiating position when peace process talks resume. END COMMENT.

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KENNEY